

**Yasunari Kawabata's
“Blue World” in “The Lake”**

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The novel "The Lake" presents characters who were incessantly in pursuit of the corporeal to replenish their concealed desires and to cohere their weaknesses to someone virile. They resorted to extenuate the impossibility of their "chase" by giving or using references to their physical (skin, feet, age) or emotional (persecution neurosis, masochistic self-disgust) invalidity. These men who determined themselves into this ditch (a location symbolically used by Kawabata) of falseness whirled them in an endless cycle of self loathing and persecution. Their strain as Kawabata put it, was like the receding sound of footsteps of the futile efforts of a ghost to snare man. Their goals were as difficult to count as the fireflies that flitted about.

Kawabata unfolds in his novel characters curved to half truths, identified with the infernal world and shriveled egos. They heard a different sound and saw a different shade of color in the world that they were in. They hurt in their own fears. They have become the mist shrouding the lake. Their existence remote from the real.

There is a Shakespearean tragic element found in the character and life of Gimpei Momoi. Like Hamlet, Gimpei affirmed to find his father's murderer.

"At ten, Gimpei resolved that the murderer if there was one, would never go undiscovered." (p. 93.)

Here lie the similarities between these two men. They both have strong melancholic and lonely shades. The ghost of their fathers haunted their existence. The fear of losing their mothers disturbed the very core of their life. This bitter resentment influenced what would later on be the direction of their lives. The death of Gimpei's father brought shame to his family. It also brought about the cold treatment from his relatives. Later in the novel, Gimpei gave up the pursuit to find his father's murderer. By giving up, he hoped to relive his youth.

Gimpei was easily arrested by the bizarre imaginations of following and attempting to seize a woman whom he found enticing and luring. Gimpei's devised "athlete's foot" served his purpose in starting up a conversation with someone he was attracted to. This ploy succeeded in winning Hisako and gaining sympathy from other women.

"A lie once told, never vanishes, but chases after us. Just as Gimpei followed women, so his lies trailed him. Perhaps it is the same with crime. A crime, once committed pursues a person until he repeats it. Bad habits are like that. The first time Gimpei followed a woman led to the second, and so on... The need to follow women is as persistent as athlete's foot; it doesn't clear

up, it spreads. One summer infection can be temporarily cured, only to erupt again the following summer." (p. 35.)

His first sexual attraction to his first cousin Yayoi, and his forbidden romantic affair with his student Hisako were forcedly stopped. His affair with Hisako caused him to lose his teaching position. He had remained bitterly raw thus breeding in him an extreme sense of destruction. Destroying someone before losing her. And by killing, suspending the defilement of beauty.

"You're not like those people whom I lose in the world and never see again unless I chase after them as they go by. This may sound strange..." (p. 37.)

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"Have you ever had that experience ... a feeling of profound regret after passing some stranger in the street? I've had it often. I think to myself, "What a delightful person!" or "What a beautiful woman!" or "I've never seen anyone quite as attractive as that before." It happens when I'm just strolling around the streets, or sitting next to a stranger in the theatre or walking down the steps from a concert hall. But once they've gone, I know I'll probably never meet them again in my life... One can't suddenly stop and suddenly speak to a complete stranger, can one? Perhaps that's life, but when it happens I could die of sadness. I feel somehow drained and empty. I want to follow them to the ends of the earth, but I can't. The only way to chase a person that way is to kill him." (pp. 37-38.)

It was for this emotional state that he fantasized for blood. This scene was vividly depicted when he saw the warm blood dripping from a dead mouse. And his imagination of blood gushing from Hisako. From here rose his pleasant desire of inflicting pain as seen with the terrier whose ear he pricked with a needle with the intention of revenge.

Gimpei divided the world into the blue world and pink world.

"He became accustomed to the idea that the driver's world was a warm pink and the passenger's blue. And Gimpei was the passenger."

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"He had first noticed these contrasting worlds of pale pink and blue when he was on his way to meet Hisako,(p.100.)

Gimpei needed someone to accept him for his ugliness. Someone who would hold his ugly feet. It was his feet that had always pursued him in his relationships.

And to significantly symbolize Gimpei's world, Kawabata used the same color for the wings caught in a web, Gimpei's mosquito net, Miyako's handbag, dress, uniform, hat and sky. These poignant representations were symbolical of the entrapment of the characters and descriptions of their cold and lifeless world.

In the web, birds were trapped with their wings folded. It would have been easy for the birds to free themselves from their prison if they had only snapped their wings. But they did not. Thus they hung immobile and helpless. The same holds true for Kawabata's characters. Gimpei, Miyako, and Arita need only to assert themselves and thereby release their inner selves from the desolation that wrapped them. The web was such a weak and fine strand which required a least amount of effort to subvert. They settled to stay however inside their blue mosquito net to watch the world outside. In turn, they pawned their self esteem.

Gimpei followed Machie and saw the lustre in her. Above all the beauty of her eyes. The eyes show the inner feelings of man. It is the purity and innocence of Machie's eyes that Gimpei wanted to swim into. He waited for Machie at the same place and time. He was hoping he would fulfill his happiness just by her sight. He waited in a ditch and ate a bitter violet. Kawabata at this point underscored his character's isolated world.

A baby was once left at Gimpei's place. The baby was supposedly his. A child he might have had with a prostitute. He returned the baby at the back door and ran away. This act has haunted him. A deep guilt in his conscience that he had to live by. This guilt compounded his unsettled and agonizing self.

"He remembered his own child slapping him on the forehead with all the force in its round palm and continuing to beat him on the head when he lowered his face. When had that been? ... But the hands of the little child were now beating wildly at the bottom of a grave against the wall of the earth that weighed down on it. From all the directions the dark walls of a prison closed in on Gimpei." (p. 13.)

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"He had no idea where his child was, or even whether it was alive or dead. It was one reason why his life had been so uncertain. If it were alive, perhaps he might meet it one day, and he honestly thought he would. But he had no way of knowing whether it was truly his child or someone else's." (p.144.)

He imagined the child crawling after him in the bank. He saw the child as a ghost which

in Shakespearean drama was his conscience. To summon his conscience, he saw kittens abandoned in the ditch.

Miyako, who lost her blue handbag, felt a thrilling sensation when she hit or hurled the handbag at Gimpei.

"Still, Miyako could not deny the fact that she had felt a momentary thrill when she lost the money - a thrill of pleasure." (p. 49.)

The act itself was an expression of her strong need to unshackle herself from her relationship with Arita. The physical contact brought Gimpei and Miyako in the same dejected and dispirited dimension. Both of them attained their identities.

"They might be inhabitants of the same infernal world." (p.21.)

Losing her handbag with two hundred thousand yen made her feel a momentary estrangement from her desolation and the claws of Arita. Miyako had made herself available for Arita's insecurities and sexual fantasies. In her relationship with Arita, she was not permitted to openly express jealousy if she ever felt the emotion.

Miyako knew she was losing her youth and how time was quickly slipping her hands from this meaningless relationship. When she touched Machie's hands, the smoothness of her hands reminded her something she had not felt in a long time. Both Gimpei and Miyako were allured with the beauty and purity of Machie. A person whom they want to chase and follow. Machie stood for everything that they both had lost and were languishing for.

Miyako's only consolation were with the unknown men in blue hats who followed her. It gave her an assuage that she had some charm left. But this lead to further her forlorn life. She knew that men followed her not for her beauty but for some strange similarity. Gimpei and Miyako played their roles in Kawabata's "blue world". One dragging himself to chase someone. The other counting upon being chased. Both aware and without hope.

Miyako believed that there is another world. She defined this world as:

"Perhaps there's a race of devils living among men but quite different from them, and perhaps they have a quite separate world of their own." (p.69.)

Arita's mother had been divorced from his father and he grew up with a stepmother. His wife committed suicide out of jealousy. Here is a man whose experiences with women have shattered him. As a result of these disintegrating experiences, he kept two women to

substitute for his mother and to satisfy his sexual pleasures. Arita was suffering from persecution neurosis. He was not able to sleep without the presence of a woman. Like a child he rested his head on the arm of Miyako and sucked her breast. Sleeping with Miyako made Arita disentrall the persecution in him.

“Miyako was well aware that Arita had come to find the pleasure of having his legs and thighs rubbed or burying his face in her breasts a more suitable pastime for his age. The busy old man referred to these gratifying hours at Miyako’s house as “the slave’s emancipation.” The words reminded Miyako of her own hours of slavery.” (p.64.)

Arita’s relationship with Miyako reared the idea of the innate evilness of Miyako. He perceived that he was a means for Miyako’s vendetta. This was the paradox of their relationship. Personal revenge becomes intricate when it is directed to oneself. Only a man who hates himself and his destiny would be seeking revenge for himself or on others.

As if by fate, Gimpei wrote the speeches of Arita. Arita happened to be the chairman of the board of Hisako’s new school. Hisako had to change schools after her affair with Gimpei was discovered. Both male characters were longing and yearning for a woman whose role is to supplant a destitute past. Gimpei found the voice of the woman in the bath house consoling.

“Gimpei was almost moved to tears. Her voice had aroused in him a sense of pure happiness and warm relief. Was this the voice of the eternal woman, or the compassionate mother? (p. 8.)

And for Arita the touch of Miyako’s breasts relaxed and secured him.

“Arita buried his face in her breasts and pressed the warm shapes against his forehead with his hands.

“Mine.” (p. 65.)

Arita was afraid to sleep because of nightmares. His dreams physically exhausted him. Gimpei on the other hand, had dreams of a mouse chasing him and imaginations of a child. Their subconscious exuded in their dreams which ultimately subdued their relationships. Their fears and unmet needs strangled them while they were awake and asleep.

Man’s “ugly feet” take him to the “blue world” of desolation and loneliness. And to relate with the real world he uses his frailty as an excuse or a means to an end. The transient pursuit never reaches its intention. It eludes and further deepens his insecurity and

loss. The defensive choices he makes further detaches him from his inner self. In the end, he doesn't function. He becomes as Kawabata presented it a terrier catching mice. Like the song of the children by the slope, he has lost his legs. Symbolic of a man whose feet no longer touch the earth.

The lake was a mirror for Gimpei. Miyako and Arita. It was there so that they might see the isolation they have made. They have lost hope and stayed inside the cold walls of a ditch. They crawled in and out of it. They stayed in their "blue world" wailing like the abandoned kittens. They have become fireflies whose transient lights and lives are caught in a cage - the "blue world".